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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Wellness Branch provides new assistance to South Dakota service members

By Capt. Anthony Deiss

RAPID CITY, S.D. – It's known as the Wellness Branch of the South Dakota National Guard and it combines four programs designed to help service members cope with the stresses involved in mobilization and deployment.

Those programs making up the Wellness Branch include the State Family Program, Employer Support to the Guard and Reserve, Transition Assistance and Military Honors. These programs help with the issues service members, families and employers face before, during and after mobilization.

"There are many of services that are available to our South Dakota service members. Issues and concerns that are a result of their deployments," said Lt. Col. Harvey Fitzgerald, Wellness Branch director. "The Department of Defense has stepped up with more resources and programs to assist these men and women who serve their country."

Although some of the sections have been established for years, grouping them under one branch helps to coordinate and focus efforts in providing the best services available for service members.

"We want to provide more staff, resources and connectivity between our services," said Fitzgerald. "It's a holistic approach to taking care of the service member. We want to take care of them from the time they join the military all the way past retirement."

Recently returning from Iraq in May, Fitzgerald feels that for service members to be successful, it takes a lot of cooperation between the service members, their families and employers.

"If a service member is being taken care of and doesn't have to worry as much about their family members or their job back at home, they are less stressed and better able to focus on their mission and return safely," said Fitzgerald, a husband and father of three.

With family being one of the keys to success, the State Family Readiness Program helps to promote healthy military families to be self-reliant during deployment and peacetime. The program provides training, education and outreach services to Guard families.

“Our State Family Program assists military families with answers about medical health care, emergency services, military benefits or any questions a spouse or family may have,” said Fitzgerald.

One of the main efforts of the program is coordinating the family assistance groups found in every deploying National Guard unit. This service brings military spouses and family members together to build a support network and help with issues or questions that may arise while their service member is away. The program also organizes the reintegration and reunion drill assembly; a unit’s first drill back after returning from a deployment.

“It’s a multi-organizational environment, where we partner with Veteran Affairs, health providers, the education office, the Chaplain Corps and other services,” said Fitzgerald, a former State Family Program director. “We want to get them registered with the VA, answer questions about education, or find resources to help them reduce problems with reintegration.”

Another service provided at the reunion and reintegration drill assembly is Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.

ESGR is a Department of Defense organization that provides education, consultation and mediation between Guard members and their employers and informing both on their rights and responsibilities when facing a deployment.

“ESGR’s role is critical in establishing positive relationships with employers that allow our Guard members to be able to serve,” said Fitzgerald. “The United States has asked a lot from their employers, and the support from South Dakota’s employers has been great.”

The Hermosa resident knows first hand the support given by employers, as his wife’s employer donated equipment to help rebuild some of their property after it was devastated by a flash flood in August of 2007.

“Even employers of spouses of deployed service members have been helping,” said Fitzgerald. “They recognize the spouse or the family of a deployed service member has their hands full during a deployment and often help where they can.”

While the State Family Program and ESGR help make the transition prior to and during a deployment easier, the transition assistance advisor helps Guard members make the transition after returning home.

The advisor helps veterans find the benefits earned as a result of their deployment. Working closely with VA offices, the advisor helps to establish educational benefits, disability claims, health claims or what ever services the veteran may need.

“The advisor answers questions and pursues issues on behalf of the veteran,” said Fitzgerald. “They are an advocate, helping them to find the services they need.”

The Wellness Branch also provides a Military Honors Coordinator to help families coordinate the final funeral honors of a service member who has passed away. The service is provided for service members whether making the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country or dying of natural causes.

All four of the Wellness Branch services are not just for South Dakota National Guard members, but for all members of the military to include active duty, Reserve and retired.

With more service members needing assistance, one of the goals for the new Wellness Branch director is to provide even more services.

“We are able to provide more services in-house rather than having to make a referral to another agency,” said Fitzgerald. “We want to integrate our State Chaplain Office and our Medical Command into our services. We also want to provide more post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury and suicide awareness training to our Guard members and their families.”

As an agri-business specialist during his Iraq tour, Fitzgerald said his experience is helping him to identify areas throughout the deployment process that may yield better service for all military members.

“Going through the mobilization process and seeing it through the Soldier’s eyes helps me to determine what information is getting out to them and how to get those services,” said Fitzgerald. “It helps me to see where we need to emphasize our efforts so our veterans are getting the right benefits and care.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION about all the Wellness Branch services, please contact Lt. Col. Harvey Fitzgerald at (605) 737-6206 or contact any of the branch sections directly:

- State Family Program (605) 737-6728
- Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (605) 737-6540
- Transition Assistance Advisor (605) 737-6669
- Military Honors Coordinator (605) 737-6927.

Photo cutline:



20070929 - LTC Fitzgerald: South Dakota National Guard member Lt. Col. Harvey Fitzgerald of Hermosa, S.D., visits with a local Iraqi on Sept. 29, 2007, near Al-Taji, Iraq. As the new Wellness Branch director, Fitzgerald said his deployment experience is helping him to identify areas throughout the deployment process that may yield better service for all National Guard members. (Army National Guard photo by Maj. David Parker)(RELEASED)

Link to photo: https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/20070929_LTC_Fitzgerald.JPG